

Who is afraid of Gender? Academic Science is

*Quem tem medo do gênero? A ciência acadêmica tem
¿Quién tiene miedo del género? La ciencia académica si*

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BUTLER, Judith.

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Who is Afraid of Gender is the most recent book by the North American feminist philosopher Judith Butler, published in the early months of 2024. It incorporates current elements of the antagonism towards the overall discussion around the concept of gender. The author is very efficient in tackling various realms under which the resistance is disseminated such as politics, religion, society and academia. Judith Butler's work is part of the foundation of the international contemporary gender theory. Her work has increasingly instigated conservative sectors to propagate hate speech, often with origins elsewhere beyond the gender debate, which assemble phantasms of all threats to their normative idealized world.

This idealized world encompasses the institution of science, here represented by academic science, which was constituted on principles of standardization and competition. As the wording suggests, they induce the promotion of objectively shared values and the suppression of individuals, subjectivities and, overall, diversity. Whatever challenges and expands the spectrum of existing identities in this context is regarded as a deviation from the so-called normal. This normal-oriented academia has endorsed works that promoted ideas such as "The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex" (Virginia WOOLF, 2021 [1929], p. 57)¹, allowing male scholars to deliberately refer to women in their work as objects, in every sense of the word, free from judgements of how they could be hurting the equal status their female counterparts are entitled. This robust set of the values, customs, norms and practices that orient the dynamics of the scientific realm has been shaken by progressist (and often deviant) intellectuals with discussions that reposition the concept of gender and related categories of analysis, such as women. Judith Butler's book presides over this movement at probably an unprecedented international scale. The

¹ Do original: "A inferioridade mental, moral e física do sexo feminino" em tradução livre do livro *Um quarto só seu e três ensaios sobre as grandes escritoras inglesas: Jane Austen, Charlotte & Emily Bronte e George Eliot*.

reality Butler updates us on endorses the perception that, although the institutional logic present in academic science is not completely impermeable, it is nevertheless difficult to unsettle as it is perpetuated by institutional actors who embody and reflect existing norms and beliefs.

Butler describes the restoration of the masculine privilege as a social project of its own. And it has, in fact, been a successful one, under which generations of academic men reproduced the academic science norms onto one another and, nevertheless, onto the first women that participated in the academic life. Historically, the convergence of several forces affected the ancient universities and first academic communities, through the promotion of the importance of individual accomplishment in the articulation of masculine identities (Paul DESLANDES, 2002, p. 577). The legacy of a time when examinations were referred to in the literature “as a defining moment and a particularly masculine or manly endeavour” is excruciating for the ones who when permitted access to university education, did so by abiding by standards designed and thought through on the basis of privileged men’s reality.

The initial steps in the disruption of the status quo of the male only academia can be observed on an author’s reflection, made in 1895, upon the presence of the first women at Oxford and Cambridge universities. The author – who is not specified by his/her/their gender – states that the presence of women in lecture-rooms have ‘*destroyed forever the University of their ideal – and by extension, the certainties of masculine power and male leadership*’ (DESLANDES, 2002, p. 577). These ideals before what academia must be, rooted in the XIII century, persist in the XXI century amongst academics and faculty members across all levels of seniority. Shifts in paradigms may not necessarily occur through overall consensus of society groups and academia is not an exception. On the contrary, resistance and potential hostility are foreseeable from the groups that witness their privilege being reduced and/or modified. In spite of a fierce structure, the evidence that Butler shares in her book reminds us that academia is not detached from society. This insertion of academia within a social system invokes movements such as academic activism, which is a very clear lens used in the book. It innovates in approaching academic theories with an activist perspective, establishing an unavoidable bridge between what is discussed and developed within academia and its social consequences. Moreover, Butler highlights the importance of the translation of academic production into socially palpable material that could potentially instrumentalize arguments in many more spheres, beyond universities. In the Brazilian context, the book faced significant resistance, echoing the author’s previous experiences of hostility from conservative and religious groups in visits she made to the country. This resistance took a tangible form when the cover of the Brazilian Portuguese edition was censored as a local publisher attached to a religious organization, claimed alleged inappropriate use of cartoon characters from a religious publication. The book had already reached stores but was subsequently withdrawn from sale following a court order mandating adjustments to the cover.

A resulting inference is the association between the antagonism experienced within society and the marginalization of gender studies within academia. It reinforces that the phantasmatic character attributed to gender by conservative representatives may also be present in academic science, precisely in relation to gender studies. The conservative wave of influences, experienced internationally as observed in the varied and extensive range of cases provided by the book, has stark repercussions in academic norms and practices, both locally and internationally. While we would like to believe that the age of faith was over and the age of reason had come, we still experience persistent antagonism towards gender studies in current day academia. The nuances of attitudes that marginalize gender theories’ researchers have roots in the foundation of ancient universities and their intrinsic (Christian) religious values intertwined with the origins funding sources of the first colleges, within the Church, remaining in place contemporarily.

While this aversion to gender studies and theories might appear as veiled for some, it is definitely present in the (sub)categorization of overall gender-related work into a subsection of major disciplines, such as Political Science and others within the Social Sciences. Extreme examples, referred to in Butler’s book, are the case of Poland, where gender studies teachers and researchers have been blacklisted under the pretext of defending family rights or the case of Florida, in the US, where power was given for the closing of programs or departments in the field of critical race theory, gender studies and intersectionality. Those are a couple among many others that follow the pattern of materialized actions taken based on arguments against gender studies justified on religious grounds. Religious attacks, inspired by the head of the Catholic Church, the Vatican, discredit concepts established in scientific research by labelling them as *fictitious*. The victims are groups and individual feminist scholars whose work, centred on the weaponized ideas within the gender macro discipline, is invalidated along with the overall scientific production around the topic.

Taking a rather inward look to academia, Butler provides detailed information on academic disputes currently active, such as the TERFs (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists) opposing feminist scholars that do include trans women in the category of women and their perspective in the work produced. Such a scenario invokes the discussion about the struggle for a legitimately

consolidated place of gender studies and all its ramifications within science. Critically speaking, the book could benefit from a broader and deeper reflection upon the repercussions of the stigmatization of gender theory for researchers and, especially the future of academic debate around gender.

What should be noted at this point is the fact that, as long as academic funding derives virtually entirely from governments, threats – rather conservative and right-wing related ones – to the political democratic status quo must also be considered as threats to the development of scientific production. The authoritarian and anti-intellectual political scene poses a threat to gender studies in academia as gender advocates are most certainly critical of the authorities above them. Nevertheless, negative impacts shall overwhelmingly affect all sorts of disruptive scholarship. The book also explains that gender affects the way we understand our social roles, including the vocation of science, especially in the delimitation of the public and private domains. Should barriers be imposed to the free and plural movement of reinventing the vocation of society, a critical stagnation of science production in old and outdated epistemologies is in sight.

Furthermore, in regards the international flow of influences around academic debate, Butler provides many examples of how gender can be characterized as a foreign concept, brought forward by elite groups or transnational institutions, in other words, imported from abroad. In between the lines, this argument could be understood as a reaction to the idea of a hierarchy in the scientific production between countries from the Global South and the Global North. However, it must be noted that this simplistic understanding of a concept being merely absorbed by an academic community implies a denial of agency of researchers, their communities, debates and epistemologies. These actions imply that entire academic communities do not think independently or critically.

Considering the idea of gender a foreign one, it is equivalent to throwing to the invisibility the local contours and adaptations that each academic community embodies to debates. It is interesting that this approach is not applied to other disciplines such as Computing Science, Engineering or Math as there is rarely social questioning of IT commands or Math-related terms being absorbed into national languages.

Finally, the book succeeds in showing how important the plurality of epistemologies is to challenge structures of advantage and the gendering of the institution of science in the making of academia a more diverse and socially excellent space for women and for all.

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BACKGROUND

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